

WILD ELEPHANTS IN THE UNITED PROVINCES

BY

F. W. CHAMPION, I.F.S.

(With four plates)

All along the forest belt at the base of the United Provinces' Himalayas wild elephants are to be found in small numbers and a few also occur in the terai forests of Oudh, as well as in the Zemin-dari forests of Bijnor and elsewhere. The largest number live in the dense bamboo forests of the Garhwal Bhabar, in the Lansdowne Forest Division, where there are probably about fifty permanent residents, but elsewhere the numbers are smaller and the total head of wild elephants in the whole of the United Provinces probably does not exceed some 250 individuals, divided up into a number of small herds, with numerous semi-solitary tuskers and maknas scattered about in the forest areas. A fairly large herd has recently appeared in the terai forests of the Pilibhit Forest Division, in Oudh, and it is probable that this herd has recently emigrated into British India from the neighbouring forests of Nepal.

In the earlier part of the last century these wild elephants were greatly persecuted by sportsmen, particularly in the neighbourhood of Dehra Dun, and it is probable that they were saved from annihilation only by the Elephant Preservation Act of some fifty years ago. This Act prohibits the shooting or killing of elephants entirely, except in the case of proclaimed rogues, and it is a great pity that some of the other species, such as rhinoceros, were not saved from destruction in the same way. Elephant-catching operations have taken place a few times since elephants have been preserved, but certainly not more than 100 have been caught, whereas the number of proclaimed rogues that have been shot could not exceed twenty, yet the number of elephants at present in existence seems remarkably small after fifty years of protection, and it would appear that they are not breeding as prolifically as one would have expected under the circumstances. The number of young calves to be seen is extremely small and it has been suggested that this may be due to in-breeding as the result of segregation from the large numbers of elephants in Nepal, of which these United Provinces' elephants originally formed a part. At one time large stretches of the Nepal terai forests adjoined the forests of the United Provinces and there were then numerous opportunities for wild elephants to pass from one country to the other, but much of the Nepal elephant country has since been opened up for cultivation and few elephants now come over from Nepal to inter-breed with the survivors in the United Provinces. The new herd in Pilibhit already referred to has apparently come from Nepal, and it is to be hoped that these animals will spread over the Province and infuse new blood into what seems to be a dying race.

The ordinary wild elephant of the United Provinces appears to be a very inoffensive individual and does not ordinarily do any harm

to mankind, although he is held in terrible awe by the local inhabitants and men working in the jungles. Indeed, in Lansdowne Forest Division—the main home of the wild elephants—there has been no casualty from them for the last ten years, although one rogue killed a number of people about the beginning of the Great War, before he was finally shot by the then Divisional Forest Officer, Mr. R. St. G. Burke, within a few hundred yards of the Forest Rest House at Kotwara.

These wild elephants are, however, extremely destructive to bamboo forests and also destroy a considerable number of young sal trees, so that some Forest Officers are of the opinion that they should be caught or destroyed in the interests of Forestry. The Balrampur trackers consider that the number of animals at present in the forests is insufficient to justify the heavy expense of 'khedah' operations, and it would indeed be a pity if Government were to allow the few remaining wild elephants in Northern India to be slaughtered for the sake of the very slight increase in forest revenue which might result upon their destruction. However, one is glad to be able to write that there is no immediate prospect of such a calamity occurring.

The United Provinces' elephants do not appear to carry very large tusks and I have never seen one with tusks which I should estimate at over 50 lbs. each. There is, however, said to be one famous tusker, known locally as the 'Palak-danta,' which wanders about in the Reserved and Zemindari forests of the Bijnor District, and this animal is reported to be one of the very finest elephants in India, worth a huge sum should it ever be captured. Once or twice agitations have been made by interested people to have this animal proclaimed as a rogue, but fortunately the evidence against him is very weak, and, so far, it has been possible to protect this magnificent creature from an ignominious death at the hands of some local sportsman. I have never had the good fortune to see this beast, or try my camera on him, although I have been in his neighbourhood a number of times and still hope that we may yet meet one day.

Even though large tusks are rare in the United Provinces, the elephants often grow to a large size and two rogues have been shot within recent years measuring well over ten feet at the shoulder, the details of these two animals being recorded in the current numbers of the *Indian Forester* at the time. Of these, one was shot in the Ramnagar Forest Division in 1914 and measured 10 ft. 4 in. high, the tusks being 6 ft. 4 in. and 6 ft. 3½ in. in length and each 56 lbs. in weight. The other was much the same size and was shot at about the same time in Haldwani Forest Division.

Wild elephants make a most interesting and exciting subject for the animal-photographer and I have managed to make some 50 negatives of individual elephants during the last five years, although I have yet to succeed in making a satisfactory picture of a herd. Some of these pictures have already been reproduced in *Country Life* and elsewhere and some typical examples—which have not yet been published—are included in this article. The first picture



F. W. Champion.

A YOUNG TUSKER IN WHICH THE UPPER EAR RIMS HAVE NOT YET BEGUN TO TURN OVER.

Copyright.



F. W. Champion.

AN OLD TUSKER WITH ONE TUSK BROKEN.

Copyright.

represents a young tusker whose ear fringe has not yet begun to turn over; the second, a middle-aged makna (tuskless male)—a fine muscular elephant; and the third, an old animal in which the ivory was worn and yellow and one of the tusks broken off in the middle. These elephants were all photographed with a reflex camera used from the back of a staunch tame female Forest Department elephant which does not exhibit the fear of wild elephants so common among tame elephants. Indeed, many tame elephants cannot be induced or driven to approach anywhere near one of their wild cousins and the mahawats are often even more afraid. It is somewhat difficult to understand why tame elephants and mahawats should be so afraid of wild elephants, which are normally not dangerous, and which have allowed me to approach within a few yards on numerous occasions without any damage resulting therefrom. True, we were once charged viciously by a 'masth' bull in charge of a herd, and on this occasion we were saved from a bad accident only by firing two barrels of a shot gun over his head, thereby causing him to swerve and rush past us at two or three yards' range; but this was an exception as the 'masth' discharge was clearly visible at some distance, and we were simply asking for trouble by attempting to photograph this particular beast. The usual semi-solitary bull will either bolt the moment one attempts to approach him on a tame elephant, or else he will stand and watch one's approach with deep interest. Indeed, he will sometimes advance towards one as one is taking photographs, and such was the case with the old tusker figured with this article, who approached so close that his whole body could not come within the field of my camera. It is somewhat nervous work taking photographs of a wild elephant—who after all is never fully to be trusted—approaching one in this way; but if one's mahawat fires a shot gun over his head whenever he comes uncomfortably close, in most cases he will retreat, or, at least, not advance any further, so that such photography provides one with a good deal of excitement without being unduly dangerous. I have not attempted to photograph wild elephants on foot, as one's view-point is so low that intervening branches and grass more often than not utterly ruin one's chances, which at all times are none too numerous owing to the bad lighting in the denser forests which the elephants frequent during the daytime. It is, however, perfectly practicable to photograph wild elephants on foot when they are bathing or drinking in open pools, but they seem to prefer the night for such operations and I have never been sufficiently fortunate as to catch one in the act in photographically-possible daylight.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature connected with wild elephants—a feature which has puzzled all who are intimately acquainted with them—is the extraordinary paucity of records of elephants which have been found dead after having died a natural death in the forests. Indeed this subject has been exploited by novelists to a considerable extent in the shape of romances dealing with the hidden stores of ivory which are supposed to exist in Africa and elsewhere as a result of the accumulations of centuries of remains of elephants which have all collected in the same place

when they felt death approaching upon them. It is said that expeditions have actually been financed in Africa with the sole object of finding these supposed treasure-troves of ivory, but none has ever been found, and the mystery still remains as to what happens to the bodies of wild elephants when they die. It is to be noted that even Mr. Marius Maxwell, whose recent splendid book *Stalking Big Game with a Camera* is practically a monograph on the African elephant, never found a dead wild elephant during his expeditions, and in his writings seems rather studiously to avoid this subject, which is of such extreme interest to all who are interested in these magnificent creatures.

I have therefore attempted to collect all records of wild elephants which have been found dead in the United Provinces forests during recent years and have tried to ascertain the cause of death in each case. The particulars of each record are as follows:—

(1) A dead middle-aged bull elephant with biggish tusks was recorded in 1921 by my brother, Mr. H. G. Champion, I.F.S., from Harai, in Haldwani Division, where it was found on a fireline about two days after death. The distance from water was about half a mile and the cause of death was uncertain, there being no sign of external injury. Some arsenic had been used in the neighbourhood for killing Rohini (*Mallotus philippinensis*) trees, but, as elephants do not eat either the leaves or bark of Rohini, it seemed unlikely that this was the cause of death.

(2) A second dead elephant, a small female, was also found some four days after death at Gorla Rau in Haldwani Division the same year. It was not inspected by any officer, but it was said to show a number of wounds on the throat and neck, and may possibly have been killed by a tiger, although such an occurrence is very rare in these forests, however frequent it may be in Burma (*vide* Mr. Hopwood's recent article in the *Indian Forester*).

(3) A third case is recorded by Mr. E. A. Smythies, I.F.S., also from Haldwani Division—which, incidentally, appears to be a very fatal place for wild elephants. This animal was a fine solitary tusker with six feet tusks and was found in November 1925 by a marking gang. He had apparently died about the beginning of October in a patch of what would have been swampy ground—but not quicksand—at that time of the year. His legs were embedded in the ground about $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 feet deep, and he was half-squatting, half-lying, on his left side. It did not appear that he had been caught in a quicksand—elephants are very clever in avoiding such danger-spots—as there was a solid bank with trees and shrubs about two yards in front of him, and he was not so deeply embedded that he could not have struggled out somehow. He was not an old or feeble elephant, and it is possible that he may have been sick at the time and thus have temporarily lacked the strength to struggle out, or he may have been bitten by a hamadryad.

None of these elephants, however, was a particularly old beast, so that the finding of their carcasses does little to help towards a solution of what happens to old elephants when their time comes to depart from this world. The same remark applies to the two dead elephants recorded by Lt.-Col. Faunthorpe in his articles entitled